

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Luke 13:10-17; Hebrews 12:18-29

Jeremiah 1:4-10 is the story of Jeremiah's call from God to be a prophet both to Judah and "to the nations". This incident is reported here at this point in the text in order that Jeremiah might validate his mission, and to authenticate and support his role as prophet.

The text first presents God's call to Jeremiah. "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you" (1:4-8)."

This text presents two realities. First, it makes clear that Jeremiah's mission is not some self-appointed task. Rather, he resisted this call as best he could; he didn't want it. He acted on this call, Jeremiah tells us, because he had no choice. He had been chosen from the womb, and had been consecrated by God to this task. Jeremiah had no choice but to accept this call.

With such an assertion, Jeremiah likens himself to Moses. Like Moses, who lived in exile in the wilderness for forty years, Jeremiah served out his call in the wilderness of Judah for forty years (Jer. 1:1-3). Like Jeremiah, Moses was chosen while in the womb to liberate, and that was why he had to be preserved by being floated among the bull-rushes as a baby (Exod. 1). Like Moses (Exod. 3:11; 4:1-10), Jeremiah resisted his call. And like Moses, God promises to be with and to use Jeremiah (Exod. 3:12). In the case of both men, God places his message in both of their mouths – Jeremiah to speak it, Moses to use Aaron as his spokesman.

The second reality in this text is that Jeremiah is called to be "a prophet to the nations". His call is not to Judah alone, but through Judah to the entire world. Such a framing of Jeremiah's call indicates that God has power over the future both of Judah and of all the nations of the world – that God is an international deity, and not just the God of Judah and Israel. Thus, Jeremiah is serving the God of the entire world.

The text continues, "Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:9-10)". Thus, God presents to Jeremiah the mission he will institute throughout his entire life, and that mission encompasses the entirety of the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is "to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant". Through his mouth and actions, Jeremiah's work will be both to pluck up and to plant, to destroy and to build. Jeremiah will have the unhappy task of speaking doom to the nation, of warning them of the inevitable consequences of their political and economic actions (particularly internationally), and of receiving the wrath of both prince and priest, king and commoner for doing so. But Jeremiah will also have the joyful task of being the first to proclaim to an inevitably defeated and exiled nation that God will make a new covenant with them in which "they shall all know me, from the

least of them to the greatest, for I will forgive their iniquity and will remember their sin no more” (31:34).

This passage presents Jeremiah’s call from God, and purposefully likens that call to that of Moses. But it does more than that. By its very presence in Jeremiah’s prophecy, this passage suggests that far more people than simply Jeremiah and Moses are called. It suggests that “call” is God’s primary way of acting toward God’s people. Both as corporate communities of Israel and of the Church, as well as each of us as individuals, we are all called by God to a particular mission in life.

Frederick Buechner, the noted Christian author, once wrote, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (*Wishful Thinking*, San Francisco, CA.: Harper and Row, 1993, pp. 118-119). This is the doctrine of “call” or “vocation”, and that doctrine can be summarized in one question: “Why do you exist?”

The biblical answer to that question is simple: “Your purpose in living is to serve God by serving humanity in a particular way.” You have been created by God to be used by God to accomplish a specific work. And all that you have gone through in life, all the experiences you have had, all the problems you have faced, every rejection you have ever struggled with, every celebration in which you have shared, every victory you have tasted all have gone into making you into who you are right now. And why? So that God can use you in a particular way.

Every human being has been created by God to serve Christ in the world in a particular way. And when we discover the deep gladness of our own lives – our redemption in Christ – and we allow ourselves to be open to the pain of the world and gravitate toward that issue of the world that hurts us the most, that is where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger come together. That is the place where God us to serve God. Not only did God declare to Jeremiah, but also God declares to every one of us, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you to be . . .” – and you fill in the rest!

Psalm 71:1-6 is a prayer for lifelong protection and help. Some of its stanzas are particularly noteworthy.

“In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress” (71:1-3).

This is a moving cry for the support, sustenance and strength of God in the Psalmist’s life. It becomes particularly poignant, however, when he compares his youth and old age.

“Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother’s womb. . . . Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent” (vss. 6a, 9).

God was faithful and clearly present in the Psalmist's birth and earliest years. Yet he feels God's absence now in his final years, and therefore calls upon God to be present to him now.

But God becomes present to him, even as he prays. Therefore, the psalm ends with a shout of joy and of praise to God.

"My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have rescued. All day long my tongue will talk of your righteous help, for those who tried to do me harm have been put to shame, and disgraced" (71:23-24).

Luke 13:10-17 is a story about the healing of a crippled woman. But there are several elements in this story that make it both unique and important. The story itself is simple enough. Jesus was teaching in a synagogue on a Sabbath day, and a woman came in to the meeting. She had been a cripple ("bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight") for eighteen years. Jesus proclaimed her healed, and "immediately she stood up straight and began praising God". The leader of the synagogue, however, took umbrage at this healing occurring on a Sabbath day and roundly criticized Jesus for it. But Jesus responded publicly to the leader with the words, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day" (vss. 15-16)? Luke then concludes his story with this commentary: "When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing" (vs. 17).

It seems like a simple and rather straightforward story. But it is much more than that. It is about the use of power either to set people free or to constrain them for the benefit of the powerful. The story begins, "Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath". That is not an innocent statement. "The synagogue" is consistently used by Luke to refer to the systems of power in Israel. Like the Temple, the synagogue was a clear center of power in Israel. Whereas the temple was the abode of priestly and Sadducee power, the synagogue was symbol of the power of rabbis, teachers and lawyers of the Law; it was the abode of the Pharisee party.

Thus, Luke is building a scene of conflict between the Israelite political, economic and religious "powers that be" (because the parties of the Pharisees and Sadducees were not simply competing religious schools of belief, but structures of power that shaped and dominated Israel's political, economic and religious life), and Jesus. This story seeks to present the nature of that conflict, and Jesus' victory as the inevitable end of such conflict.

The story begins with Jesus entering alien turf, there to confront these systems on both their policies and their actions. Luke tells us that he was not simply a presence in that political environment, but that "he was teaching" there. That is, he was being proactive in presenting to these systems and their leaders God's intent for them, so that they were being called to accountability. But words were not enough. To truly join battle with these "rulers of the synagogue", Jesus needed to act on his message in a way that demonstrated to the people both

the dichotomy between himself and the powers, and their commitment to standards that belied God's intentions for the world. It was this woman that provided the means for such an action.

In most of the stories of healing that occur in the Gospel of Luke, the person or his/her representative initiates a request to Jesus for their healing. Not so in this story. Luke very deliberately states, "Just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment" (vss. 11-12). Jesus initiated the healing; the woman did not! Thus, Jesus uses the occasion of the appearance of this crippled woman to agitate these leaders into a response that would expose them for what they really were, and thus would cause them to lose credibility before the people.

Jesus acts proactively to heal this woman, to heal her in the synagogue (the abode of the powers) and to heal her on the Sabbath (thus, apparently breaking the Law by which these Israelite leaders governed, controlled and dominated the people). And the head of the synagogue (thus, the "ruler" of this portion of the political, economic and religious systems) rises to the challenge and responds predictably. "But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day"" (vs. 14).

The text tells us that the ruler of the synagogue "kept saying to the crowd". He didn't do it once, but repeatedly. He felt exceedingly threatened by Jesus' action, but didn't feel equal to challenging Jesus directly. Therefore, he "blames" the crowd for Jesus' action, and keeps on blaming them. It is as if he believes that by his continuing protest, he will win over the crowd to his position.

But he will not succeed. Although not directly confronted himself, Jesus directly confronts the leader of the political, economic and religious systems in that town. And he does so by shaming him (and, thus, shaming the systems that rule Israel). "But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" (vss. 15-16)

Jesus makes clear that he is not simply chastising this leader of the synagogue, but the entire synagogue system, for he directs his attack, not against this man but against all who would use the Law in order to control and dominate the people. That this is what Jesus is doing is made clear by the fact that he doesn't speak to that man alone, but instead uses the plural ("you hypocrites", not "you hypocrite" and then states "each of you" rather than "you") to include all those who would use the Law to dominate.

Jesus then builds his attack upon what anyone would see as reasonable compassion. Even those who would most strictly obey the Law and its Sabbath rulings would not be so hard-hearted as to deprive the animals that they owned from the water or care that they would need to sustain their lives, even though it was the Sabbath. Yet, would they, simply over a regulation of the Law, deny Jesus' act of compassion toward this woman who has suffered for eighteen years? Is

principle so much more important to you than people? If so, what kind of human beings are you anyway? And what kind of authentic “rulers” are you (since a ruler ought to be one who, first and foremost, would look after the welfare of the people)? Thus, by this simple attack, Jesus exposes the political, economic and religious leaders as the frauds that they are, more interested in maintaining their power and control over the people than they are caring for the people’s welfare.

And the people love it! They love Jesus’ exposure of the powers for the manipulative, controlling people that they are. Luke tells us, “When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that Jesus was doing”!

Thus, it is crucial to see this story as the political story that it actually is, demonstrating Jesus’ very intentional attack against the systems of his day, his calling upon them for accountability and compassion, and thus his calling of them back to what God intended them to be (building a nation of shalom through justice, equitable sharing of wealth and an authentic relationality toward one another that deeply cared what happened to each other) rather than what they were allowing themselves to become.

Hebrews 12:18-29 continues the author’s exploration of the response of faith to God’s magnificent work through the faithfulness of our Israelite ancestors of faith (“so great a cloud of witnesses”) and through Jesus and his saving work. Let’s review that response.

The author speaks to us – both Gentile and Jewish Christians – who make up the latest in this lineage of faith. Our ancestors of old “received torture, suffered mocking and flogging, were stoned and were killed” (11:35-37), because of their faithful carrying out of God’s work of faith in their lives. And that faithfulness reached its apex in Jesus, “who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (12:2b).

Now it is our turn to embrace by faith God’s salvific and transforming work in our lives and in society, and to respond to that embrace by faithfully living out that faith by working for the transformation of the public order. But we who have taken on that mantle of responsibility “have not yet resisted to the point of shedding our blood” (12:4). We must, therefore, accept the reality that our engagement in public life against the political, economic and religious systems will bring to us “trials for the sake of discipline” (vs. 7). In fact, those trials will help make us into more committed Christians, more firmly resolved to follow Christ into the trials of public life; therefore, such trials will act as spiritual discipline to us (vss.7-11). “Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed” (vss. 12-13).

Thus, by such a route of logic, the author of Hebrews brings us to the epistle lesson for today. The author writes, “You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken. (For they could not endure the order that was

given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death”. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear” (vss. 18-21).

As the author of Hebrews earlier spoke extensively of Moses as one of the greatest examples of faithfulness to God’s call (11:23-28), so here the author again returns to Moses. He recalls the burning bush and of God giving to Moses the call to liberate the Israelites, a call that would radically alter both Israel’s future and Moses’ life, the subsequent call out of Egyptian slavery and the building of a new nation through the disciplines of the wilderness (Exod. 19:12-19; 20:18-21; Deut. 4:11; 5:22-25).

But their great origin as a people is as nothing next to the dream and mission toward which Moses and Jesus and now the Christian community is called. “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and of innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (vss. 22-24).

The author of Hebrews earlier used the metaphors of God’s nation and God’s city as the objective and vision toward which Israel, Jesus and now the contemporary church works, prays, witnesses and waits. Speaking of Abraham and his people, he wrote “they confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. They desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them” (11:13-16). His image of the saints of old acting as “a great cloud of witnesses” filling a stadium that, by definition, would be in God’s ultimate city (12:1-2), and of Jesus as the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (12:2), continues that city/country motif. Now those metaphors reach their crescendo in the book of Hebrews.

The author of Hebrews states that, in completing the great “run” of faith and faithfulness initiated by the worthies of the Old Testament, the driving objective of every Christian and of the entire church must be that of participating in the claiming and building and embracing of “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” and of “Mount Zion”, “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (12:22, 28). That is, what this author is stressing is that the entire objective and purpose and focus of God’s people must be on making their contribution toward bringing all human society and the environment into the realization of God’s intentions for humanity. The metaphors of city (“the heavenly Jerusalem”) and nation (“the kingdom of God”) best capture those intentions. But what is described throughout scripture, by whatever metaphors individual authors might choose to use, is human and natural society in which all live in a loving and trusting relationship with God and each other, practicing justice toward all, equitably sharing wealth and eliminating all poverty – that is, the shalom community! That is what we are to work towards. That is the great movement of faith in which we share. And that is the great race that we are to run.

So, “see that you do not refuse the one who is speaking from heaven”, “for indeed our God is a consuming fire” (12:25, 29). Do not allow your life to be diverted into anything other than

working for Christ and His Kingdom. For this is the end, the purpose, the focus and the mission for every Christian's life and for the work of the church. And only by working for the realization of that kingdom do we faithfully "run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (12:1b-2a).

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